

Learning the Power of Cooperative Organization through Play

Tammy Bunn Hiller, Bucknell University

Abstract: For years I have taught my students about cooperative organizations. Until I discovered the game Co-opoly™, I had a hard time exciting them about the possibilities of this organizational form that brings great value to individuals and communities world-wide but that is not well understood by most management majors. Playing the game in class has deeply engaged my students and led to rich discussions. Strikingly, after playing, students continue to bring up issues related to cooperatives throughout the rest of the semester. If you'd like to learn how to use this game in your class, come play it with me!

Keywords: Cooperative Organizations; Learning Games; Sustainability

Introduction

Cooperative organizations can be agents for positive change throughout society – both through their impact on the lives of the workers and members of these organizations and through the missions they are organized to fulfill. My experience is that most of my students are unfamiliar with this organizational form, so have a hard time understanding how cooperatives really work and are unlikely to get excited by their possibilities if all they do is read about such organizations. In 2017 I discovered the game *Co-opoly*TM (created by The Toolbox for Education and Social Action) which helps students to learn how co-ops work through cooperative play. I have now twice used the game in teaching upper-level undergraduate students in my managing for sustainability course. Both times the game deeply engaged my students and led to a rich discussion in the debriefing. Even more exciting, students continued to bring up issues related to cooperatives throughout the rest of the semester. My positive experience led me to want to share this game with my MOBTS colleagues. Although I have used this game only with upper-level undergraduate students, I think it would work well with traditional and non-traditional undergraduate students at any level, graduate students, and cross-cultural students. I say that because included in my classes have been traditional undergraduates, working adult undergraduates, and international students, all of whom embraced this learning experience.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

I believe it is critical that we teach our students about the wide range of business, government, and civil society organizational forms through which people can come together to accomplish things they cannot do alone. There is a whole class of organization that is ignored by much of our society – including many management professors and students – that holds much promise for making our world both more democratic and more economically, socially, and

environmentally sustainable. These democratic organizations, cooperatives, are organizations made up of people who voluntarily unite to “meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise.¹” How can we have true democracies in the societies in which we live without having small democracies in places such as our schools, where we work, where we get our food, and so forth? What would it look like for the organizations and places that are important to us in our everyday lives to be more democratic?

In total, about one billion people, a seventh of the world population, are involved with cooperatives in one way or another (as employees, members, and / or customers). In a recent year, member-owned organizations in the US had over \$3 trillion in assets, earned \$500 billion in revenue, and accounted for over one million jobs.² The collective revenues of the worlds’ 300 largest cooperatives (\$1.6 trillion) are roughly equal to the GDP of Spain (the world’s ninth largest economy).³

Cooperatives foster social inclusion and democratic knowledge and practices. Cooperative businesses place emphasis on job security and improved working conditions, pay competitive wages, promote additional income through profit-sharing and distribution of dividends, support community facilities and services such as health clinics and schools, and have shown greater resilience in the face of economic crisis than regular businesses.⁴ For these reasons and more, cooperatives are well suited to helping realize the seventeen global goals for sustainable development contained in the UN’s *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

¹ <http://cultivate.coop/wiki/Cooperative>

² Laboral Kutxa the Mondragon Bank and National Cooperative Bank NCB to Partner in Growing Domestic Worker-Owned Cooperatives. (Sep 20, 2013). *Economics Week*.

³ *Cooperatives and the sustainable development goals: A contribution to the post-2015 development debate. A policy brief*. (2015). International Labour Organization AND International Co-operative Alliance: Brussels.

⁴ *Ibid*.

They are also well suited to livelihoods full of hope, intention and meaning. Therefore, it is our responsibility as management educators to help our students understand and value this organizational form.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives of playing this game in a management course are to 1) help students to understand how cooperatives work, 2) excite students about the possibilities of creating or working in a cooperative organization, and 3) prepare students to be able to compare and contrast benefits and liabilities of the cooperative form with other organizational forms in later class sessions when they are introduced to other organizational forms.

My learning objectives for this workshop are 1) to help other management educators imagine how they might use *Co-opoly* in their classes to teach about cooperative organizations and 2) to learn from others about their ideas for effectively teaching about cooperatives. The workshop contributes to our collective thinking as management educators about how to help students learn about and critically analyze one of many different organizational forms and ways of managing to work for social, environmental, and economic justice and the promotion of human rights.

Exercise Overview

Teaching with *Co-opoly* works best if you have at least an 80-minute class period; I teach it in an 82-minute class period. This exercise requires having enough copies of the board game *Co-opoly* (created by The Toolbox for Education and Social Action) for all students to play (3-6 players per game). You will also need one copy per team of the handout in Appendix A. Students will use this handout at both the start and the end of their game play.

To play the game, divide the class into groups of three to six students. In my experience, the game works best with groups of five or six. Tell the students, “You are going to play a game together in which your group starts and runs a cooperative organization.” Give each student group a *Co-opoly* game box and a “Creating Your Cooperative” handout (Appendix A).⁵ Explain to students that before reading the game instructions, they must together decide their cooperative’s mission. They should use the questions on the handout to help them decide their mission and how they will make decisions as a group.

Once they have decided their missions, either ask the students to read the game instructions themselves or show them the 2:52 minute video “How to Play Co-opoly”, available on YouTube⁶. I find that the video helps to quickly orient both instructors and students to how to set up and play the game, but students usually need to look back at the instructions as well.

Once the students have set up their game boards, allow them to play the game for at least 45 minutes. I usually tell them, “In order to have enough time for a rich discussion after we finish the game, we’ll stop playing at _____ time. It’s unlikely that your group will finish the game by then. It usually takes about an hour to ninety minutes to play a full game, but you can get a lot of value out of the game even if you don’t finish it. Enjoy the game, but also try to pay attention to how your group is operating, making decisions, etc.”

After stopping game play, ask participants to score their co-op on the “Evaluating Your Cooperative” part of the handout in Appendix A.⁷ Then facilitate a debriefing of the experience of playing the game using the discussion questions in Appendix B. Note that prior to this class, I assign readings about cooperatives (see Appendix C). After discussing the game play, I move on

⁵ This handout is from the *Educational Toolkit* available from The Toolbox for Education and Social Action.

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=161&v=TFM-0tj02J4

⁷ *Ibid.*

to discussing what they have learned from the readings about cooperatives and how playing the game has influenced their interpretation of those readings. Appendix D contains this second set of discussion questions. Because we spend more than one class session discussing cooperatives, our discussion of the second set of questions usually takes place at the start of the next class. However, it is possible to squeeze in discussion of at least some of these questions on the same day as you play the game.

Session Description

Ideally, I would like to have a 90-minute session. My session would have to be capped at 18 participants. I own just three copies of the game that I will use in my session, and up to six people can play each game. Ideally, my session would be done in a classroom with three tables (or sets of combined tables) that are large enough for six people to sit around to play the game. I would follow the following outline:

1. Introduce myself and briefly explain why I think it is important for management educators to teach students about the cooperative organizational form. (5 minutes)
2. Divide participants into groups, explain how to play *Co-opoly*TM, and have participants play the game so that they can understand what their students would experience if they were to use the game in their classes. (45 minutes)
3. Facilitate a shortened debriefing of the experience of playing the game (using only some of the questions that I ask my students when debriefing the game in my class) so as to give the participants a chance to talk with each other about playing the game. Then give participants the full list of questions that I use to debrief the game with my students, the list of readings about cooperatives that I assign to my students, and the questions that I use to discuss those readings. (20 minutes)

4. Facilitate a discussion about *Co-opoly's*TM value as a way to learn about cooperatives, participants' thoughts about how to improve upon my debriefing of the game, and participants' ideas about other ways to effectively teach about cooperatives. (20 minutes)

Conference Theme Track

I would like my session to be considered for the conference theme track of “*teaching agents for positive change.*” In order for students to become agents of positive change who can effectively engage with the increasingly complex social, environmental and economic challenges of our day, they must be able to think innovatively about how to create organizations. To do that, they must first understand many different organizational forms that can be used to do business and community work. Learning about cooperatives is a hole in many students' management education. My workshop is designed to introduce a fun way to help fill that hole.

Unique Contribution

I have not presented this work before, and this proposal is not under review elsewhere. With that said, I submitted a similar proposal to OBTC 2017, which was accepted to that conference.

Unfortunately, about a week after I was notified of my proposal's acceptance I had to withdraw it from the conference because I learned that a three-day training session I was required to attend for my job was scheduled at the same time as OBTC 2017.

APPENDIX A: *Co-opoly*TM Game Handout

CREATING YOUR COOPERATIVE

Before you play *Co-opoly* your group needs to design the cooperative that you will be playing as. Think about what kind of business you would want to work for and own. a place that would be fun and rewarding to work for, and a place that you owned, and no one was your boss. Remember, real democracy means that everyone's voices and ideas are heard, and respected. Try and take many ideas and blend them into one business that everyone is excited about and wants to work for!

Guiding Questions:

- What would your ideal job be, and what would that look like as a company?
- What would you make or do, and who would be your customers?
- How will you make decisions as a group? Everyone has to agree, majority vote, or another method?
- Is there a specific problem in your community that your coop is trying to solve?

EVALUATING YOUR COOPERATIVE

This next section is for AFTER play.

Now that you have finished playing, lets think about how democratic and fair your coop was. Fill out the score below and grade your coop. Vote on a scale of 1-100, with 100 being the best.

Some things to think about when you vote:

- *Did decision making feel fair?*
- *Did everyone get a chance to do all the different things in the game? Or, if they didn't want to, were they able to say no?*
- *Would this be a place you would want to work in the future? Why?*
- *Could it have been more democratic? How? Why?*

CO-OP SCORE:

_____ **OUT OF 100**

APPENDIX B: Discussion Questions to Use in Debriefing *Co-opoly* Game

- 1) How did it feel to play this game as compared to playing monopoly?
 - a) What was most challenging for you while playing *Co-opoly*™?
 - b) What was most enjoyable?
- 2) What specific things did you learn about being in a co-operative from playing this game?
- 3) How did your group make your decisions? Did you create a process that you followed for each decision or did it vary? How and why?
 - a) What would you have changed about your decision making process? Why?
 - b) How did you decide to handle your salaries? Would this be feasible in the “real” world? Why or why not?
- 4) Was there a moment that you wish you had handled differently in the gameplay? Why?
 - a) What would you change about your role in the cooperative the next time you play?
- 5) Did the mission you chose for your cooperative affect how you played the game? In what way?
- 6) How did you go about evaluating your co-operative after you finished the game?
(Individually? As a group?) How did you resolve any disagreements about your evaluation?
- 7) On a scale of 1-100, how democratic was your co-operative (from your evaluation on the handout)?
 - a) What did democracy mean to your cooperative?
 - b) What could have made your cooperative more democratic?

APPENDIX C: Readings about Cooperatives that I Assign to My Students

- 1) Birchall, J. (2011). Chapters 1, 2, and 10 in *People-centered businesses: Co-operatives, mutuals and the idea of membership*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, NY.
- 2) *Cooperatives and the sustainable development goals: A contribution to the post-2015 development debate. A policy brief*. (2015). International Labour Organization AND International Co-operative Alliance: Brussels.
- 3) Restakis, J. (2010). Chapter 1 in *Humanizing the economy: Cooperatives in the age of capital*. New Society Publishers: Gabriola Island, BC, CA.
- 4) *What is a co-op?* (This booklet created by cultivate.com comes with the Educational Toolkit available from The Toolbox for Education and Social Action)

APPENDIX D: Discussion Questions to Discuss Cooperatives More Generally

- 1) How familiar were you with co-operatives before you did the readings and played the *Co-opoly* game?
- 2) What personal experiences have you had with cooperatives? In what role(s)?
- 3) Would you want to work in a cooperative? Why or why not?
- 4) What is distinctive about cooperatives as an organizational type?
- 5) What are some major differences between cooperatives and more typical businesses?
- 6) What are some situations, environments, and / or purposes that you think would benefit from the cooperative style of work and governance? Why?
- 7) What would it take to transition our current economy into a cooperative focused economy?
- 8) What are some ways that cooperatives could address the current economic, social, and environmental issues we face in the US? Elsewhere in the world?
- 9) How can cooperatives be used for community empowerment?
- 10) What are significant challenges of creating cooperative organizations and making them sustainable?